

The Book of Good Love

OF THE

Archpriest of Nita, Juan Ruiz

TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH VERSE BY ELISHA K. KANE



Juan de la Cuesta
Newark, Delaware

Translator's Preface

Traduttore e traditore

A TRANSLATOR should make the past live in the present. When a poet, like Juan Ruiz, has been dead for six hundred years the difficulty is obvious. It is necessary to keep the historical perspective, to present the local color in all its narrow picturesqueness but at the same time prevent its antiquarian impedi-
mentia from obscuring the author. I have tried to make my bard speak as clearly and as naturally in America of the twentieth century as he spoke in the Spain of the fourteenth but at the same time to leave no doubt that it is always the Archpriest of Hita and not Hamlet in knickers or Helen of Troy jazzing up her private life for modern sophisticates. When Juan Ruiz prayed, or wrote hymns I have used King James English for I understand that is still the custom today when people pule. Where he has been racy and colloquial, I have endeavored to be the same. When he used slang and thief's cant I have done likewise. At times Juan Ruiz is obscene; I have not soft pedalled such passages nor uttered them *sotto voce* with smirks but let them ring out *fortissimo con amore* for the greater glory of God and the shivering delight of old ladies of both sexes—hence this private edition.

My translation has been a labor of love and if I have occasionally been unfaithful to the poet in one of his weaker moments let me reply that infidelity is a natural concomitant of love—particularly for one who has been wedded to a work so many years as I. Nevertheless, as they say in matrimonial circles, I have never quarreled with Juan Ruiz all the time I have been married to him, but have loyally loved, honored and obeyed him, perhaps not according to the Pharaical letter of the law, but certainly according to his spirit.

A preface seems to be the conventional place to render oblation and thanksgiving to persons who have assisted mentally, immorally or financially in the printing of a book. With this in mind let me sincerely and gratefully but with becoming modesty accord first place to myself. "Without his unselfish labor, without his constant, friendly and unstinted faith, etc., etc., this work never could have been completed." Second glory I accord to Professor J. P. Wickerbottom Crawford of the University of Pennsylvania for no particular reason at all except that he flayed my last book because I had unfortunately neglected to burn due

incense to him in the preface and I do not want this to happen again. Third prize goes to Professor Keniston of the University of Chicago who has earnestly offered very good advice which I have consistently not followed. I don't know whom to accord fourth honors, but it really doesn't matter. Perhaps Professor N. B. Adams of the University of North Carolina should have it. He was my friend, notwithstanding that we were neighbors, during the dark days of my pedagogy, and I feel that I should make some public profession of the good rye we kept buried under my dog kennel. I also ought to mention Professor S. E. Leavitt of the same university because he put up with me for three years as his colleague and I still like him—the same goes for Professor Huse, and Professor Learned, his friend. Last but not least I want, particularly, to offer homage to all good book reviewers who speak praisefully of this work.

Blest be he who spares these bones
But damned be he who stirs my stones.

Kane, Pennsylvania

ELISHA K. KANE

The Life and Work of Juan Ruiz

Si non e vero e ben trovato

THE AUTHOR

ALMOST nothing is known of the life of Juan Ruiz. He was born, perhaps in the eighties of the thirteenth century, perhaps in the nineties, perhaps not. His native town was, perhaps, Alcalá de Henares, perhaps Guadalajara, perhaps not. Most of his life seems to have been lived in New Castile. It is certain that he became Archpriest of the village of Hita not far north of Guadalajara. For unknown reasons he was thrown into prison—unjustly, he claims, as all prisoners do—and there he languished some thirteen years. His book was finished, perhaps, in 1330, perhaps in 1343, perhaps not. He appears to have died about the middle of the fourteenth century, but then again, perhaps not.

So much for scholarly precision and exactitude; now for unscholarly conjecture. Ruiz was born of poor parents, the love child of a strolling beggar and small town prostitute. Certainly his affection for old bawds dabbling in sin like his reverence for the spotless virgin bespeaks a childhood fixation. At a very early age the precocious gamin was corralled from the gutter by some discerning ecclesiastic. Within the walls of a monastery, he received, as an embryo clerk, a formal education in reading and writing and an informal one in the infinite debaucheries of various theological confraternities. There he first observed life; there he learned how to write it down.

Despite the advantages of this liberal education, as the unruly youth grew older, he tired of the religious life and felt the lure of the open road. Running away from the church when its restraints, punishments and penances became intolerable, he endured, like Pablo and Lazarillo, the vicissitudes of a vagabond. He starved and feasted, begged and stole, loved and lechered, with many a sturdy picaro. He listened, fascinated, to strolling jongleurs, now singing their songs in crowded taverns, now telling their tales upon the lonely highways. Little by little his own genius began to develop. At first he composed careless doggerel for blind beggars and riff-raff students. Then he began to embroider, with mocking realism, upon romantic pastourelles. In his hands, fables, proverb-laden, took vigorous and spontaneous form. Love songs, too, he wrote and infused them

with a fervor and naïve beauty hitherto unknown. In those years of wandering his heart widened with his horizon.

But as time went on the vagabond's thoughts returned again and again to the church which had nurtured him. Sleeping in filthy hovels, or in rainy ditches, along the endless highways, became too much for his aging bones. He began to see the hardship if not the error of his ways, and like many a better man decided to consecrate to God the Devil's leavings.

The Devil had left much. Shrewd in the wiles of men, his right reverend ability soon won him the position of Archpriest of Hita. There, cynical and tolerant, grizzled but virile, he must have been a popular confessor to the opposite sex. It is easy to imagine what delightful penances he imposed upon the erring ladies of his district. It is easy to understand how the unhappily married, and the happily widowed, would come to him for consolation, and it is quite certain that they received as sweet solace as that which he freely gave. That was a season of refection and reflection. He wrote little, but the wine of his experience aged and mellowed.

Then, alas, into his paradise came a snake—the worst of snakes—an intolerant, religious master. In 1337 the arrogant, bellicose Cardinal, Don Gil de Albornoz became Archbishop of Toledo. Hardly was he there a day before he clapped the Archpriest into prison for being Juan Ruiz—a very good and sufficient reason. Those were great days when right triumphed over wrong without justice.

While languishing in prison, in order to beguile the dismal interminable hours, he began and finished his famous "Book of Good Love." Recalling his Aesopic fables, he embedded them, like so many proverbs, in appropriate portions of various longer episodes, as for example, in the tale of the seduction of Lady Sloe. Poems that would not logically fit in, he left simply helter-skelter upon the very thinnest of sequential frameworks. His work, therefore, resembles a sort of diary, with jottings quite incongruous in matter, and in spirit. Occasionally the gloom of his dungeon overpowered him and he wrote hymns; occasionally the bleakness of mediaeval night darkened his mind and he moralized, but usually he managed to keep a stout heart. Stone walls were no prison for his fancy; iron bars no cage for his gay satire. His heroism was unquelled alike by the narrow prison of life and the straiter prison of Don Gil.

Juan Ruiz was a wise man with little learning. Smatterings from the pseudo Ovid gleaned from Pamphilus undoubtedly he had; bits of Cato and tags from the Scriptures he drags in. But the mere mention of Flower, Tristram, the Speculum, Guy's Rosary and other mediaeval clutter are no more evidence of genuine familiarity than with us the mention of Einstein. The wisdom of the Archpriest came from his observation of life. Yet even here the poet learned much and missed much at the same time. Like most Spaniards he possessed the faculty of living among things without seeing them. Whatever did not directly concern him he did not perceive. On the other hand his concentration and engrossment in his own milieu, his Ptolemaic orientation of everything with himself, gave him a certain narrow strength and glowing intensity which marks his work unmistakably. Here, however, the poet projects his life upon his work and it is in the "Book of Good Love" that one must look for a fuller knowledge of the author.

THE POEM

"THE most powerful book ever written in the Spanish language," the eminent critic, Cejador y Frauca, calls "The Book of Good Love." With scholarly restraint he continues, "Our literature presents three summits which reach up to the stars and tower over the loftiest productions of the human mind. The "Quixote" in the novel, the "Celestina" in the dramatic, and "The Book of Good Love" in the lyric, satiric, dramatic—in all genres because the surging, creative genius of this solitary poet combines them all as he lifts up his powerful voice in an environment half warlike, half barbaric." Indeed, were it not for fear of damning Juan Ruiz with faint praise one might cite further encomiums of the sober Cejador like the following. "In strength of fibre, in fluent artistry, in tumultuous vitality, unembarrassed sincerity and openness of heart, the Archpriest of Hita surpasses all the artists in the world." Spanish critics never fully appreciate the greatness of their poets and so one finds them belittling Juan Ruiz with titles like, "The Spanish Homer," "The Spanish Boccaccio," "The Spanish Chaucer" and "The Spanish LaFontaine."

Of course, the Archpriest is no Homer. He lacks the profound, prophetic strength of the author of the Iliad although he preserves much of his rough, elemental vigor. He is no Boccaccio; he does not possess the terse artistry or